



Bus driver shortage in NSW

The NSW Bus Industry Taskforce was established on 1 May 2023 to bring together bus operators, industry experts, the workforce and community representatives to recommend ways to improve the delivery of bus services in NSW. It has been asked to focus on the quality and reliability of bus services across the State, and the effectiveness of the current networks in meeting community needs.

The Taskforce has a year to carry out its investigations and make recommendations to Government, with a series of formal reporting dates:

- an initial update by 10 July 2023
- recommendations on the initial areas of focus by 10 October 2023
- a final report by 1 May 2023.

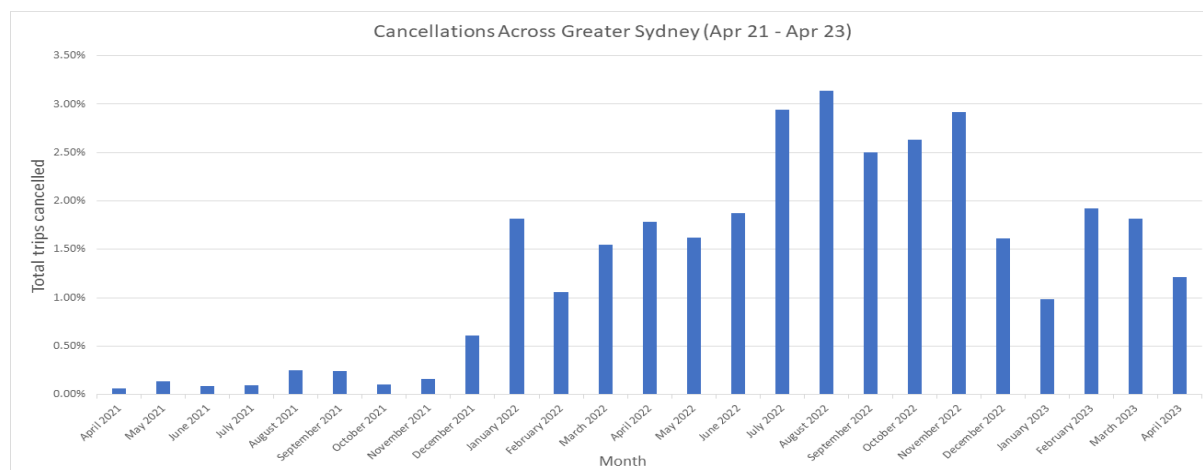
After only three weeks of investigation, including two formal Taskforce meetings, meetings with some Sydney bus operators, and briefings from key areas in Transport for NSW (TfNSW), it is already apparent that there are acute and significant issues around:

- bus service cancellations in some parts of Sydney and the Hunter region
- The reliability of supply of bus services to cover planned and emergency rail, light rail and ferry service replacement
- additional services to cover major events.

TfNSW and operators have attempted to minimise the impact on bus passengers through a more intensive focus on attempting to align service delivery with staffing availability in their contract management activities. However, it is evident from contact from bus passengers to the Taskforce that they remain frustrated with the reliability of services.

These issues require immediate action.

Figure 1: Bus service cancellations Greater Sydney April 2022 to April 2023



The key finding at this early stage is that most service cancellations and other service failures are a direct result of driver shortages. Some depots are significantly understaffed.

Bus NSW, the bus operators, and the Rail Tram and Bus Union and the Transport Workers Union, all agree that the high level of bus driver vacancies is a major contributing factor. Each of them has genuine and practical proposals to respond to the issue in the short, medium, and long term, but they will need some further working through.

Many bus operators are already trying to address the issue through their recruitment campaigns, including supporting new recruits through the required training and authorisations processes. Advice from TfNSW to the taskforce suggests that some existing driver authority requirements are contributing to unnecessary delays in issuing driver authorities.

For example, last year 2,148 bus driver authority applicants had to provide extra documents, 468 on a repeat basis, to satisfy that they could lawfully work in Australia. The Taskforce notes that employers already have obligations under federal immigration legislation to ensure that people may lawfully work in Australia.

Because of this duplicated, redundant requirement, one hundred and forty-two bus drivers had their driver authority suspended, preventing them from working. It also distracted regulatory staff from undertaking other work to improve service delivery to bus driver authority applicants.

TfNSW also assisted with an advertising campaign over December 2022 and January 2023. Some operators are starting to reap the fruits of these efforts. TfNSW data show 737 bus driver authorities were granted in Jan-Mar 2023 compared with 397 in the same period in 2022.

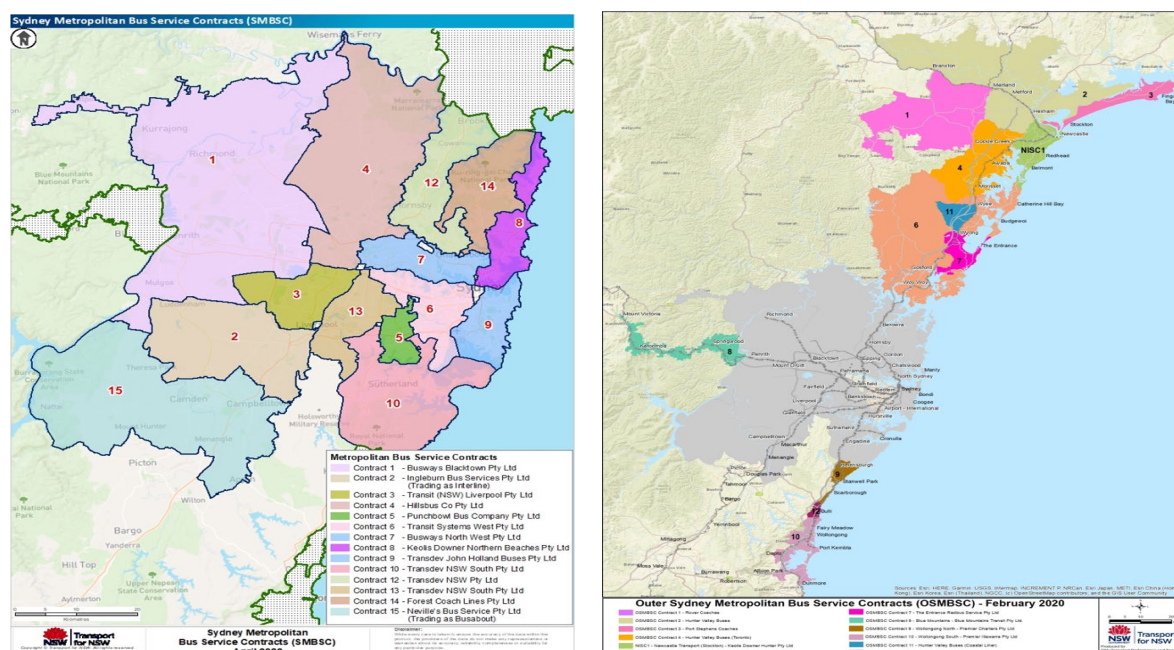
Despite this effort, there remains a gap between the number of active drivers employed and the number of drivers needed for scheduled bus services for the community. Many passengers are still left stranded, with limited options to complete their journeys, disrupting access to essential services, such as work, school, and medical appointments.

Table 1 Bus Regions most affected by driver vacancies (April 2023)

Bus region	Drivers needed to deliver contracted services	Driver vacancies	Vacancies as % of staff needed
R6BSP	1163	114	10%
GSBC007	862	90	10%
GSBC008	778	68	9%
GSBC009	1018	33	3%
SMBSC014	165	25	15%
SMBSC001	585	23	4%
OMBSC010	355	16	5%
NISC1	316	14	4%
OMBSC002	241	13	5%
OMBSC008	102	13	13%
Total	5585	409	7%

Across the remaining 16 bus contract regions in Greater Sydney and Outer Metropolitan areas, there are a further 108 driver vacancies, as reported to the Taskforce for April 2023.

Figures 2 and 3: Sydney and Outer Metropolitan bus contract regions



As the latest Greater Sydney Bus Contracts are rolled out, some of the Greater Sydney Bus Contract Regions are being consolidated. The above represent the configuration as of April 2022.

Based on these findings, the Taskforce has resolved to put a list of early recommendations to the Government for urgent and immediate action to support increased bus driver recruitment, and other areas for further investigation.

Immediate actions

Bus Industry Roundtable

1. Convene an urgent bus industry roundtable in June 2023 to examine and bring forward practical suggestions and solutions for the current bus industry workforce shortages (drivers and maintenance staff), as well as other operational suggestions to improve bus service delivery in Greater Sydney and across NSW.

Driver Authority Improvements

2. Make it quicker, easier and cheaper for people to get their bus driver authority by:
 - eliminating a duplicated requirement for a bus driver authority applicant to prove to TfNSW that they have the right to work in Australia. Employers must already ensure that their employees are complying with visa conditions under immigration law.
 - Enabling TfNSW to issue notices relating to bus driver authorities electronically
 - Clarifying and reinforcing that medical assessments must be done before submitting a bus driver authority application, to minimise any rejection of applications.
 - Permitting drivers over the age of 25 to apply for a bus driver authority if they hold a current Australian driver licence and have held an open, restricted, provisional or probationary Australian or [nationally recognised overseas driver licence](#) for at least 3 years. Requirements for drivers under 25 would not change.
 - Waiving the \$70 application fee for 12 months and reviewing the application process to streamline how applicants provide relevant information.

Public awareness and promotional campaign

3. Implement a 6 to 8-week targeted media campaign to complement current efforts by bus operators to recruit more drivers. This should include radio, digital display, social media and Google search, as well as using TfNSW assets (buses, rail stations etc) to attract job applicants. Key demographics and geographies should be targeted. Estimated cost \$240K.
4. The Chair of the Taskforce to meet with the Acting Secretary of TfNSW to encourage the development of innovative approaches to attract and recruit workers to the transport industry at large, given the known skills shortages across transport.

Service adjustments

5. Transport for NSW should continue ongoing contractual and operational discussions with operators who require urgent timetable reconfiguration to keep services running.
6. The Parliamentary Secretary should convene the first Bus Passenger Forum in June 2023 (with the support of the Taskforce and TfNSW) to ensure that the impact of service cancellations to local communities is captured as part of the early recommendations to Government.